

DISEASE PREVENTION TIPS FOR PERSONS HANDLING PET RODENTS



Any animal may be carrying germs that can cause illness in humans so following some simple precautions to prevent disease transmission from animals is always important.

A rare human disease that people can get from wild or pet rodents occurred recently in New England organ transplant recipients who were infected by the donor's organs. The donor had recently purchased a pet hamster. The cause of the disease, lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV), was found in rodents from the pet store where the hamster was purchased and hamsters from a supplier to the pet store. Although many pet stores have stopped receiving and selling rodents from that supplier, it is unclear whether other rodents may also be infected.

LCMV is normally found in three to 40 percent of wild mice, especially house mice, which can then infect humans or pet rodents.

LCMV rarely causes human illness. Of the few people who may get sick, the symptoms are usually mild and may include fever, stiff neck, lack of appetite, muscle aches, headache, nausea, and vomiting. Symptoms occur one to two weeks after exposure and are usually short in duration. More serious disease affects the nervous system. Those at highest risk for rare serious illness have weakened immune systems. **Infection of pregnant women during the first or second trimester can result in birth defects and fetal death.**

What you can do to lower the risk of illness from your pet rodents:

1. Wash hands with soap and water after handling pet rodents or cleaning up pet droppings, cages, or areas where pets have been.
2. Keep rodent cages clean and free of soiled bedding.
3. Clean cages in a well-ventilated area or outside. Wear rubber, latex, vinyl or nitrile gloves and wash hands thoroughly when you are done. Once the cage is clean of solid material, wash it with a dilute bleach solution (one and one-half cups of bleach to one gallon of water) or another household disinfectant.
4. Closely supervise young children, for example those less than five years old, when cleaning cages or handling rodents. They should be supervised or assisted in washing their hands immediately after handling rodents and rodent cages or bedding.
5. Never kiss or hold pet rodents close to the face.
6. Keep pet rodents from coming in contact with wild rodents or their droppings or nests. Pet rodents should always be supervised when not in their cages.
7. Pregnant women or persons with weakened immune systems should seriously consider not owning a pet rodent. If such persons are in a home with a pet rodent, they should, at a minimum, avoid prolonged stays in the room where the rodent resides, keep the animal in a separate part of the home and ask another family member or friend to clean the cage and care for the animal.

For further information, see the following websites: www.vdh.virginia.gov and www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/spb/mnpages/dispages/lcmv.htm